

# RUtopia

by  
Marshall Bell



*Coastal RUtopia, 120 x 180 cm*

Marshall Bell, as a political strategist, has spent a large part of his life working to get land rights and cultural heritage matters assisting traditional owners regain their country. He has an unusually detailed knowledge of what has been taken from Indigenous Australians. So when, as an artist, he starts taking something in return from the whitefellas you might expect it to be done in the spirit of payback. But not so. Marshall has other ways of dealing with anger, and in the past he's turned it into optimism and channelled it into constructive legal campaigning. Surprisingly, there's no anger in his art either. There's some sadness, but also a lot of humour, and a strong belief in a better future.

He looks to the future in terms of adapting and changing in order to survive. The paintings he makes are gestures of resistance to the stubborn belief in the Western world that tribal cultures are only authentic if they remain unchanged. The popular taste for certified genuine old-style Aboriginal art has, in his opinion, led to a very limited appreciation of Indigenous culture. He uses the term “cultural reproduction” to describe art that is heavily dependent on unchanged tradition. Some people regard that way of working as an effort to keep tradition alive. He doesn't dismiss or condemn cultural reproduction, but right now, it's not what he wants to do. Art that isn't fully connected to the realities of day-to-day life can't have much meaning for the people who produce it, and Marshall wants to make art that really does mean something.



*Two RUtopian Flowers, 100 x 150 cm*

His paintings acknowledge the ability of tradition to change and develop, and instead of turning his back on the cultural, technological and religious changes that have been forced on Indigenous Australia, he uses them.

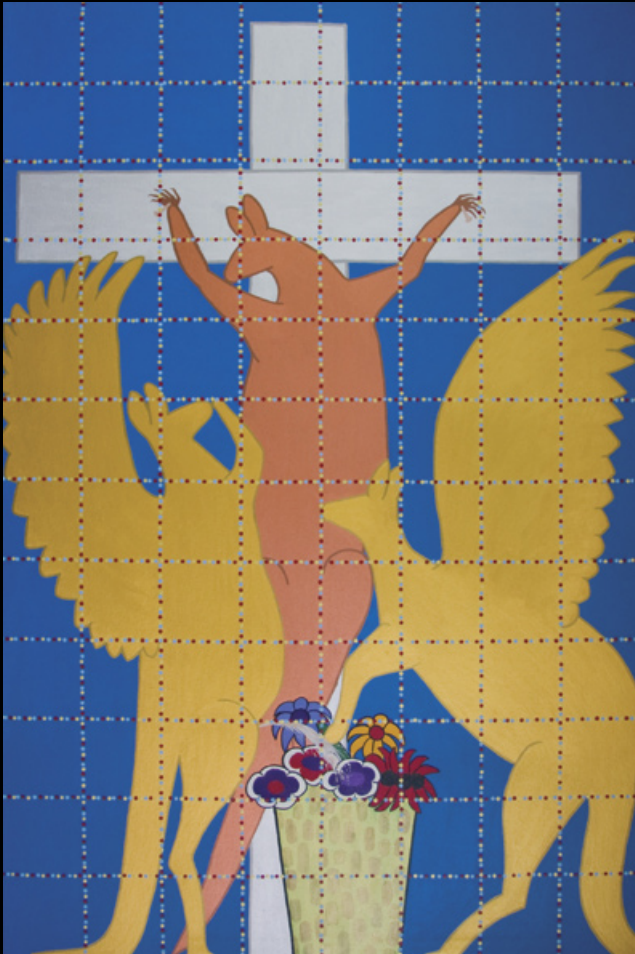


*Urban RUtopia, 150 x 120 cm*

For many thousands of years artists all over this country made art that was an inseparable part of their religious beliefs, and their religious beliefs were an inseparable part of daily life. The rise of what we like to call Western civilization was based on the process of those connections being broken, and when Western civilization reached these shores it set about breaking up the connections here. The classical Indigenous art of many centuries ago simply doesn't reflect the lives led by Aboriginal people in Australian cities and towns. It's not an expression of their education, the way it would have been before the arrival of Cook & Co. In many cases it can't be properly incorporated with their religious background.

This fragmented system of beliefs that has been a legacy of white settlement is in fact a symptom of the much wider fracturing that runs through the basis of modern Australia. Until reconciliation is a fact and not just a slogan, racial divisions will continue to undermine whatever we achieve.

Marshall Bell's paintings propose an evolved version of his inherited classical culture that allows some of the lost connections to grow back. Christian mythology and Aboriginal mythology are grafted together in his imagery. Metallic paint and high-rise buildings share the canvas with totemic animals that would traditionally have been painted in ochres. The recurring grid pattern that looks like the signature of modernist minimalism is actually based on the stitched lines of traditional kangaroo skin cloaks and blankets.



*The Miracle, 180 x 120 cm*



*Original Sin, 115 x 75 cm*

The key figure in his ideas about combining two traditions is the early 20th century Australian painter Margaret Preston. Preston was just about as different from Marshall Bell as anyone could be. She was female, she was rich and she was white. She also, however, believed that visual art could only reflect the reality of Australia by incorporating both the Indigenous and the imported cultures. She didn't have an Aboriginal education corresponding with Marshall Bell's European education, so her depth of knowledge about her cultural opposite didn't match his, and some observers may regard her Aboriginalised modernism as rather superficial. Nevertheless she appreciated the need for culture to adapt and change in order to stay alive. She borrowed from Aboriginal art, and now the Aboriginal artist Marshall Bell is borrowing from her. This could be described as repaying a loan.

In this exhibition, the most recognisable detail borrowed from Preston is the precise, hemispherical floral arrangement in her 1928 painting *Aboriginal Flowers* (now in the Art Gallery of South Australia). It was actually a bunch of artificial flowers made from feathers by Aboriginal women to sell to tourists, so these flowers are hybrids in every sense of the word. Preston also depicted Bible stories, including a crucifixion, in which the figures are Aboriginal. In one of her pictures a white angel expels a black Adam and Eve from their Garden of Eden. Marshall Bell's crucified figures and inhabitants of Eden are kangaroos; hence the title of this exhibition, RUtopia.

In his RUtopian mythology, winged kangaroo angels bring support and consolation to the suffering figure on the cross. It could be a direct translation of the Bible story, except that these angels piss on the ground, causing vases of Margaret Preston *Aboriginal flowers* to burst forth. A lot of Aboriginal creation stories are as earthy as this, but what do the flowers have to do with it? Perhaps they're a reminder that the European culture that once aimed to steamroll Aboriginality out of existence is in fact capable of changing. Preston wanted to see it change by learning from Indigenous people rather than imposing on them.

Most of the Aboriginal flowers in this exhibition contain curled up, embryonic kangaroos. They're also in the trees, waiting to mature and spring to life, populating RUtopia like the seeds that are flung from a mature pod when it springs open. Even his crucifixion paintings are more about life than they are about death. It's easy to condemn the present, and very difficult for an Indigenous artist not to, but Marshall Bell's paintings express hope for the future. Throughout his adult life he's worked to change the unpleasant realities of how things are at present, and in his paintings he uses a personal set of symbols to imagine how Australia might ultimately mend its fractured foundations.

~ Timothy Morrell

Timothy Morrell is a freelance art writer and curator.



*Changed By A Dark Angel, 180 x 150 cm*